

Saints: It's 'unfortunate' vet rejects honor over anthem protests

A Navy veteran is taking a stand against those taking a knee.

John Wells, a retired U.S. Navy commander, turned down an offer from the Saints to be honored prior to last Sunday's game against the Bears because he can't "in good conscience" enter an NFL stadium due to the ongoing national anthem protests.

"Although I am touched and honored to be selected for such an award, the ongoing controversy with NFL players' disrespect for the national flag forces me to decline to participate in the presentation," Wells wrote, according to a release, per reports. "I am unable, in good conscience, to enter an NFL stadium while this discourtesy prevails. Since this award is tainted with the dishonorable actions of the NFL and its players, I cannot accept it."

Wells, who is the executive director of Military Veterans Advocacy, was slated to receive the Peoples Health Champion Award, an honor awarded at Saints home games to recognize "the exceptional achievements of Louisiana residents age 65 and older."

Wells described the national anthem protests as "a slap in the face" to military veterans.

"Men and women have fought and died for the flag that the players are disrespecting," Wells wrote.

The Saints called Well's decision "unfortunate and disappointing" in a lengthy statement released Thursday.

"Respectfully and honorably, we chose Mr. Wells for the Peoples Health Champion Award purposefully for this game to bring to light the exact issues that he and his organization represent - the health and well being of our military, veterans and their families," the Saints said in a statement.

"Unfortunately, he has chosen very publicly not to accept this honor and refused the opportunity to promote the very cause for which he was being honored and distract from awareness we hoped to build throughout our community. We respect his decision, he has that right, and we thank him for his service to our country and his past efforts on behalf of the military and veterans."

The Saints later point out every player has stood for the national anthem since the franchise was founded in 1967 -- outside of Week 3 this season where "a few of our players did sit."

Since then, the Saints have kneeled prior to the anthem in a show of unity against racism and social injustice before rising and standing for the anthem.

Despite the fact the team kneels before the anthem, and not during it, fans have continuously booed the team for their actions, something Saints safety Kenny Vaccaro addressed Thursday.

"Our crowd boos us before the anthem, therefore it's not about the flag, it's about the fact we are bringing awareness to a cause that makes people uncomfortable," Vaccaro wrote in a string of tweets.

When a fan said people are mad because they believe the Saints will eventually sit during the anthem again since they did so earlier in the season, Vaccaro responded, "We already said what we were gonna do so get the picture or don't come."